



In the Public Eye

News and Features

FDA targets snack foods industry over allergens

Debbie Josefson, *San Francisco*

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is stepping up its drive to improve labeling of snack foods that contain allergens after investigators found undisclosed traces of peanuts in a quarter of all snacks tested.

About 7 million Americans have food allergies, and they rely on product labels to avoid ingredients that could trigger an anaphylactic reaction. Of the 30,000 annual visits to the emergency department because of food allergies, roughly half involve exposure to peanuts, and about 200 people per year die of anaphylaxis from food allergies. Even trace amounts of allergens can cause fatal reactions in susceptible individuals. Such trace amounts may be due to cross contamination, namely, utensils used in making one product are used in making another.

The FDA commissioned the study in response to an increase in product recalls by snacks manufacturers related to food allergy involving peanut and egg products. FDA investigators examined 85 companies in Wisconsin and Minnesota that manufacture snack foods, biscuits, sweets, and ice creams. Some 25% of the companies failed to identify all ingredients in their products, and about 50% did not ensure that all ingredients used in a product were listed on the product label. Of the products sampled, 25% had undisclosed traces of peanuts and 11% had unlisted traces of eggs, another common food allergen.



Private collection

Cookie alert: many snacks contain undisclosed allergens

In recent years, peanut allergy has been recognized as a major food allergy, affecting up to 8% of children and 2% of adults in the United States. Many US airlines have stopped supplying peanut snacks on flights because of the prevalence of the allergy.

Current FDA rules require food manufacturers to list all product ingredients on their labels with the exception of trace "natural" ingredients. Although it is unlikely that the FDA will be able to inspect all food manufacturers and enforce tighter restrictions, the agency is issuing new guidelines to its investigators to help them pinpoint and tackle problem manufacturers.

Nine states, including New York and Wyoming, have introduced legislation in Congress that would require food companies to warn consumers that their products may contain food allergens.